

Elizabeth Alice Austen House
2 Hylan Boulevard
Rosebank
New York
Richmond County
New York

HABS No. NY-5472

HABS
NY,
43-ROSE,
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
801 19th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NY-5472

ELIZABETH ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE

Address: 2 Hylan Boulevard, Rosebank, New York, Richmond County,
New York.

Present Owner: Manhattan Realty Corporation.

Present Occupant: Mr. and Mrs. Hugh C. Humphreys.

Present Use: Private residence.

Statement of
Significance: Although portions of this Staten Island structure
reputedly date from around 1700, it did not assume
its present appearance until after its purchase by
John H. Austen in 1844. The house commands an
excellent view of the Verrazano Narrows and New York
Harbor. Austen's granddaughter, Elizabeth Alice
Austen, an accomplished amateur photographer, lived
here from 1867 to 1945.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: The following information
on the chain of title is abstracted from "The Austen Family
and Their Home and the Former New York Yacht Club," an
article which appeared in the The Staten Island Historian,
written by Hugh C. Humphreys, a lawyer and occupant of the
house:

According to the best evidence, the house stands on land
patented to one George Browne on April 22, 1691, by
Governor Henry Slaughter. In 1723, when Lancaster Symes
surveyed the Island under a grant from Queen Anne to him
of all the vacant or unpatented land on Staten Island
(the gaps or so-called "gores" between the original
patents), the property was apparently owned by Jacob,
Lambert and John Woulter (Woulterse, Woultersson) and
the house was occupied by Jacob. Symes' records reveal
that Jacob had been living in the Narrows area for some
time prior to 1723. (The earliest record of his being
on the Island dates to April 5, 1709, in a reference to
his being elected as an assessor of the South Precinct,
which included the Narrows area.)

Unfortunately no evidence of the transfer of title from
Browne to Woulter exists, although it is definite that
in 1723 Woulter resided on the Browne patent. Nor is

there any evidence of the subsequent transfer from Woulter. The first legal evidence of title is an 1813 will of Joseph Lake.

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In 1835 the farm was purchased by Daniel Low, a prominent Staten Islander, for the sum of \$10,000. (About twenty years earlier it had sold for \$3,500). Low thereafter formed a real estate development concern, the Staten Island Association, and the farm became part of its 828 acre tract near the Narrows. Roads were then laid out and the property was subdivided and sold. On October 10, 1844, John H. Austen, Alice's grandfather, purchased the farmhouse and a half acre of land for the sum of \$2,500. Thereafter he acquired adjoining plots until he had approximately one acre of land.

The mortgage on the house was foreclosed in 1945. The property is now owned by the Manhattan Realty Corporation.

2. Date of erection, and additions and alterations: In the same article Mr. Humphreys proposed the following theory for dating the structure:

The Austen House began as a one room frame dwelling built in the late 17th or early 18th Century, and through many years of gradual addition and alteration grew into the charming cottage we know today.

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The earliest section was a one room frame dwelling with shingled roof and siding, parts of which are still existant under the walls and roof of the present house and the evidence shows that a large fireplace once graced the north gable. The massive beams in this section, hand hewn with a broadaxe, are some of the finest in the city today. Sometime prior to 1730 another room and hallway were added to the house. At this time a massive fireplace was constructed on the southern gable and one of even larger dimensions was added underneath it in the cellar. Although most of the cellar fireplace has been destroyed, the one on the main floor was almost entirely bricked in and enclosed within a wall many years ago. It has been recently uncovered and largely restored to its original condition and is especially distinguished by its relative shallowness and a unique smokechannel. By 1730 the house had a low-slung roof supported by seven-foot hexagonal wooden columns, square topped and bottomed.

The stone section of the house, which juts out of the rear of the frame part was built sometime before the American Revolution. The earliest part of this section was a crudely constructed kitchen containing a large fireplace with a bake oven. In accordance with the custom of the times, the kitchen was probably separate from the main house, and sometime hereafter [sic] joined to it by the addition of another room. This stone section, until recently thought to be the oldest part of the house, is noteworthy for its fine deep windowseats and casements.

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By the early 1880's the house was an "L" shaped structure with the frame section paralleling the Narrows and the stone section extending to the rear. The farm consisted of a number of outbuildings and at least one other smaller house built almost on the beach. Of the 112 acres a little less than half was cleared and farmed, the rest perhaps being orchard.

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Thus within two years of his [Austen's] moving in, the old fireplace on the northern gable was removed and another room with fireplace was added onto the frame section giving the house its present "F" shaped effect. New dormers were added, some of the cruder beams boxed in, and new flooring was laid over the old. To the exterior were added fine, tall chimney pots, and an abundance of trim, especially around the dormers and along the ridge of the roof. Family tradition has it that James Renwick, the well-known American architect, made the house into the charming Gothic cottage it is today.

On April 10, 1878, the Richmond County Gazette published the following article about the house:

An Old Landmark

A writer in the New York Times . . . speaks of one of the old landmarks of the island: "After crossing the railroad track, follow the street nearest the shops. At the end of it stands the long low cottage of Mr. Austen. It is next to the boarding station, where all vessels anchor to be inspected by the Doctor . . . The scene is very attractive, with the shipping and the view of the bay. The house was built 150 years ago, and was occupied by British officers when they had fortifications on the present site of Fort Wadsworth. The interior is very

interesting, with its primitive yet solid construction and a collection of various antiquities. The bare oak beams, the floors of English deal taken from ships' cabins, the dormer windows, and the general appearance of the house make it one of the most attractive relics on the island. A massive stone chimney rises from the cellar to the roof in almost the proportions of the Pyramids. In the cellar it had a great fire-place to warm and light that room as the quarters for the slaves of the family. The fireplace in the parlor is faced with tiles, 200 years old, from Amsterdam. They represent various biblical subjects, as Lot, Jonah and the whale, Sampson's feats, and various scenes described by Washington Irving in his legend of Sleepy Hollow. On the mantel are a pair of brass candlesticks that were in the Van Tassel family at Catskill; possibly the very ones that were used for Ichabod's visits. There is also a link of the chain that was stretched across the Hudson at West Point, which was made by Mrs. Austen's grandfather; also, a brass-knocker from a house in Chester, long occupied by Washington, where he was often visited by Lafayette, Rochambeau, and other celebrities.

3. Important old views: In the collections of the Staten Island Historical Society are several photographs of the house taken by Alice Austen during the late nineteenth century.

B. Historic Persons Associated with the Building:

1. Elizabeth Alice Austen (1866-1952), more commonly known as Alice Austen, lived in her grandfather's home from 1867 to 1945, when the mortgage was foreclosed. She was forced to leave her home and later became an inmate of the City Farm Colony on Staten Island. Shortly before her death her collection of photographs and negatives, then at the Staten Island Historical Society, were re-discovered and later brought her national recognition. She was introduced to photography in the early 1880's; and her sensitive, studied works have revealed that she was one of the great early amateur photographers.

C. Sources of Information

1. Published and secondary sources:

"Alice Austen, A Portfolio of Historic Photographs," Infinity, XVI (July, 1967), 4-5, 8-23.

"Architects Support Austen landmark," Staten Island Advance, April 10, 1967.

"Austen House Rates Priority," Staten Island Advance, March 17, 1967.

"Cottage," The New Yorker, September 30, 1967, p. 36.

"Elizabeth Alice Austen." (A pamphlet prepared by the Staten Island Historical Society).

Humphreys, Hugh C. "The Austen Family and Their Home and the Former New York Yacht Club," The Staten Island Historian, XXVIII (April-June, 1967), 9-16.

Humphreys, Hugh, and Benedict, Regina. "The Friends of Alice Austen," Infinity, XVI (July, 1967), 6, 28-31.

"An Old Landmark," Richmond County Gazette, April 10, 1878, p. 1.

"\$100,000 Needed for Austen House," Preservation News, May, 1967.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural interest and merit: Although portions of this Staten Island structure reputedly date from around 1700, it did not assume its present appearance until after its purchase by John H. Austen in 1894. The house commands an excellent view of the Verrazano Narrows and New York Harbor.
2. Condition of fabric: In need of repair.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Number of stories: One and one-half stories.
2. Number of bays: The front (east) facade has five irregularly spaced bays.
3. Layout, shape: The building is roughly T-shaped in plan.
4. Foundations: Irregular fieldstone patched with brick.
5. Wall construction, finish and color: Clapboard painted white; rear wing of stone.
6. Structural system, framing: Wooden frame.
7. Porches, stoops: Front (east) porch is six bays wide with columns consisting of open work of X's. There is tongue-and-groove flooring.
8. Chimneys: Stone chimneys at north and south ends of house;

chimney at north end has two stone chimney pots.

10. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The Dutch-type front door has two-panel, wooden lower section and glazed upper section with diamond-shaped panes. There is a box lock, large iron strap hinges and an iron latch. The storm door also has diamond-shaped panes.
- b. Windows: There are three types of window sash: some have diamond panes, double-hung; some are one-over-one light, double-hung; and some are casement.

11. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gabled roof, covered with green asphalt shingles.
- b. Cornice: Simple molded wooden cornice.
- c. Dormers: On the east side of the house there are three dormers with diamond-paned windows, wooden mullions, scrollwork bargeboards with quatre-foil and dropped pendant designs. There are three dormers on each of the rear and kitchen sides; these dormers have six-over-six light, one-over-one light, and diamond-paned sash, all double-hung.

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plans, by floor: First floor: Front door opens into stairhall. To the north are two adjoining rooms and to the south one room. In the rear (west) wing are two adjoining rooms, with smaller rooms to the north and south of the eastern-most of these connecting rooms. Second floor: At the south of the stairhall is one room. At the north end are two adjoining rooms with bathroom to west of second room.
2. Stairways: Enclosed single flight of stairs to upper floor.
3. Flooring: Wooden floor boards throughout.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The south wall of the south room on the first floor is fieldstone painted white. The south wall of the stairhall is paneled wood. All other walls on the first floor are plastered and painted white. Ceilings have exposed floor joists and floor boards. On the second floor the partitions are of wood or plaster; ceilings are plastered and painted white. There are built-in cupboards and drawers on both floors.
5. Doorways: Many old wooden doors.

6. Lighting: Electrical.

7. Heating: Central heating. In the room to the south of the stairhall there is a very simple brick fireplace with wooden mantle.

D. Site and Surroundings

1. Orientation and general setting: The house faces East, overlooking the Verrazano Narrows and the New York Harbor.

Prepared by Diana S. Waite
Architectural Historian
May, 1968